

Coins

Autograph hunters stalk their valuable prey

By Roger Boye

FOUR DAYS BEFORE he died, Abraham Lincoln scribbled some words on a letter, ordering that several prisoners be released from jail after they took an oath of allegiance.

He had pardoned many men before, and the note he wrote on April 11, 1865, was typical: The message was short and to the point, because Lincoln rarely wasted words when writing routine orders. He signed it "A. Lincoln," as he did almost all of his correspondence. [He reserved "Abraham Lincoln" for documents.]

These few words, written over a paper area

of less than 8 square inches, were sold in 1975 by the Rare Coin Co. of America for \$795.

The note is valuable because, of all the presidential signatures, Lincoln's autograph is the most popular collector's item.

However, some collectors obtain an important autograph for the price of a postage stamp. They simply write a prominent person, asking for his or her autograph. The results of such a request are often better than some people might think.

One person who does that is Robert Notlep, who started when he was 12 by asking members of the New York Yankees for their auto-

graphs [one of his first autographs was Joe DiMaggio's]. Now, more than 30 years later, he has accumulated more than 25,000 signed photographs, books, and letters in a irreplaceable collection.

Notlep explains how to collect autographs by mail and how to collect historical autographs in his book, "The Autograph Collector" [Crown Publishers, Inc., \$4.95].

Such a book is invaluable, because the novice collector must know how to distinguish authentic handwriting from facsimiles, and how to identify an authentic signature from one made by a stamp, secretary, or forger.